



Study

3

# Alpha & Omega

## Bible Studies in the Book of Revelation

Study #3: Revelation 2 & 3

Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

### ABOUT “Alpha & Omega”

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

~ Revelation 1:8

*Alpha & Omega* is the second series of Bible Studies especially written so that you can do them alone at home, or with others in a group. They don't depend on a leader or someone affirming the right answer. The title of this series comes from the introduction of John's letter to God's people, preparing them for the persecution and difficulty the Church of Christ was about to face. But it gives them (and us) two views of this: the seen reality of what God's people experience, and the unseen reality of God's glorious and gracious rule in Christ over all these events. They suffered, and we will suffer, but Christ rules even over the suffering ... and he is returning soon with saving victory for his Church!

### INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION 2 & 3

Study 2 noted that the “Seven Churches in Asia” John was writing to were actual churches. In these two chapters John is instructed to write to the angel of each of the churches in turn, each receiving a message specific to that church. But because every church was to hear all the messages as John's letter was read aloud to them, each was to learn from the others, just as we should, for the attributes and calling of those churches find their counterpart in our churches today. While there is nothing in the text to suggest we should try to work out if a particular church is a “Smyrna type” or an “Ephesus type” church for example, the attributes of grace and failure we share with any or each of those churches are clear pointers to church and individual growth in Christ today.

### THE ANGELS OF THE CHURCHES

The seven letters to the Asian churches are addressed to each church's “angel.” What are they, and how does that work?

1. Don't be misled by translating the “angel” too narrowly as only “messenger.” Angels are spiritual beings who worship God [Heb 12:22], proclaim God's glory [Lk 2:13,14], witnesses to God's work [Job 38:7], can take human form [Gen 18:1ff; Heb 13:2], carry out God's commands [Ps 103:20], wage war on earth [2 Ki 19:35], protect God's people [Mk 13:27; Act 5:19; 12:7], bring God's judgement [2 Thes 1:7], minister to God's people [Heb 1:14], ministered to Christ on earth [Ps 91:11,12 cf Lk 4:10,11], and, yes, reveal messages from God [Matt 1:20; 4:11; Lk 1:30; 24:33] ... and more!

2. Revelation 2 & 3 reveals that each of the seven churches had an angel through which Christ's message was to be mediated [cf Heb 2:2]. What other roles these angels played is not made known; we might reasonably take it that they cared for the churches in the service of Christ (not unlike being mediators of Christ's message via John). But we cannot take from this that every church has such an angel or that we have personal guardian angels. (While both are possible, our call is to trust Christ, rather than look for help from angels, even if that is how he might send help.)

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## GETTING STARTED

Please remember that this is God's Word. God used John to write God's words in God's way for us. So

1. Pray, asking God to give you his Spirit so that you will honour him, understand his word, and learn how to live better for Jesus.
  2. Read the passage listed above for this study. What is it mainly about?
  3. Now discuss/think about/answer the questions that follow.
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## HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES

This study is different from the others! Revelation 1:3 promises blessing to those who read and/or hear the words of this book. If read allowed as a book to a congregation (as John clearly intended) chapters 2 and 3 would be read as a unity, not as separate letters. So this study briefly looks at a few things the original readers/listeners would have been aware of in each letter that are not clear to us today, before considering the two chapters in their unity.

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**Please read Revelation 2:1-7**

1. **In verse 5, what will be the evidence of "remembering" and "repenting"?**
  2. We don't know anything certain about who the Nicolaitans were or what they did (and that applies when we get to verse 15 also), but verse 6 reveals that God was pleased the Ephesians hated what the Nicolaitans did. **Why was God pleased with this hatred?**
  3. **Now fill in the "row across" on page 4 for the Ephesian church.**
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**Please read Revelation 2:8-11**

4. The only number mentioned so far in Revelation is "seven," which is the actual number of the churches written to, but it also symbolises perfection. Following that pattern, when in verse 10 "ten" is used, it is therefore likely to have literal and symbolic meanings: but at this point in the book we have no way knowing the symbolism. **But what two things are certain to happen to the believers in Smyrna?**
  5. **Now fill in the "row across" on page 4 for the church in Smyrna.**
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**Please read Revelation 2:12-17**

6. The "double edged sword" of chapter 2 v 12 is probably like the Roman soldiers' short sword: able to slash backwards and forward, and to stab. It was used by the Romans on emblems and banners symbolising Rome's authority. **According to verse 12, who really has the authority in Pergamum?**
  7. We do not know who Antipas was or how he was put to death. **What did Antipas and the church in Pergamum have in common when Antipas died?**
  8. Verse 14 mentions Balaam and Balak. It is not easy to tie together the various accounts of these men (see 2 Peter 2:15 & Numbers 22). But what is clear is that the Church in Pergamum harboured some whose doctrine is called here "the teaching of Balaam." **What two sins did the heresy of Balaam entice believers to?**
  9. **Now fill in the "row across" on page 4 for the church in Pergamum.**
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Please read Revelation 2:18-28

10. It is not clear who the woman “Jezebel” was, but verse 24 suggests she includes in her teaching a belief in an early form of Gnosticism, in which only the super-spiritual could know the deep secrets of “real” religion .
- Apart from the deep-secret deceit, what two sins does she entice believers into?
  - What is the significance in verse 22 of God causing her to suffer on a bed?

White stones were used as entry tokens for pagan feasts, but the names on the stones of verse 17 are *personal* (known only to the recipient) yet at the same time are *God’s* name (see 3:12) giving entry to a far better feast!

11. Now fill in the “row across” on page 4 for Thyatira.

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Please read Revelation 3:1-6

12. Now fill in the “row across” on page 4 for Sardis.

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Please read Revelation 3:7-13

See Isaiah 22:22 for the “Keys of David” (here a symbol of Jesus - see 1:18). For “the new Jerusalem” see 21:2.

13. Now fill in the “rows across” on page 4 for Philadelphia.

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Please read Revelation 3:14-22

14. Now fill in the “row across” for Laodicea.

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### SEVEN LETTERS TOGETHER

15. According to the end of each letter (eg 2:7; 2:11; etc), who had to listen to each particular letter?

Now use the “Summary/Theme” row on page 4 to help answer these questions:

16. What is revealed about Jesus in these letters?

17. What, in the light of these letters, characterises faithful Christian church life?

18. What, in the light of these letters, characterises unfaithful Christian church life?

19. What, in the light of these letters, are key temptations for faithful Christian church life?

20. How, in the light of these letters, should faithful Christian churches respond to trials?

21. What is promised to those who overcome the world and its persecution?

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22. In the light of these letters: What can you thank God for? What can you pray for others? What can you trust God for?

23. In the light of these letters, what changes do you need to make: In your faith? In your Worship? In your attitude? In your life?



### SEEING THE UNITY IN THE SEVEN LETTERS OF REVELATION 2 & 3

Each of the seven letters follows the same pattern, outlined in the heading row (omitting the repeated section: “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”) Complete the “cross-word” with one or two key words in each space *across*, then look for the common themes *down*, entering key words in the “Summary” space. The brief introduction given for each church is to help show something of the context in which each church’s message particularly fitted each church.

	How Jesus Identifies Himself	What Jesus Knows About the Church	Counsel Given to the Church	Promise to Those Who Overcome
<b>Ephesus</b> Revelation 2:1-7	One of the four most powerful cities in the Roman empire, with a safe harbour, dominated by the Temple of Artemis/Diana (Acts 19:23-41), the largest building in the Roman Empire at the time. The city had a reputation for being “alive” as the greatest city in Asia with the worship of a multitude of deities (each with its own temple) including Emperors and Diana; with its economy (the major port city of the region); and with the arts. The Church at Ephesus was the first established in the region, commissioned by Paul to preserve and proclaim the gospel (Acts 20), it appears to have stood as the “leading” church among the seven.			
<b>Smyrna</b> Revelation 2:8-11	Another port city, destroyed in BC 600 by invaders (it “died”), and “reborn/rebuilt” in BC 290 on Alexander the Great’s commission; it came to call itself the “first in Asia” because it was so pleasant a place with beautiful buildings. Loyal to Rome with temples to emperors, Zeus, and Cybele (goddess sexual-partner of its rulers) on the main street (“the street of gold”), it had a large anti-Christian Jewish population (who had expelled Christians from the synagogues), and was the greatest centre for emperor worship in the entire empire (stimulating ongoing civil opposition that some years later led to significant martyrdoms).			
<b>Pergamum</b> Revelation 2:12-17	Historically rendered insignificant through rebellion against Rome (ending BC 84), at the time John writes Revelation, Pergamum was enjoying a revival of fortune and influence (begun with the building of a Temple to the living Augustus Caesar in AD 29). It would become a magnificent inland city sheltered by a citadel on a mountain-top 400 m above, but was already a religious and intellectual centre with a zealous commitment to emperor worship upon which citizenship, patriotism, trade and even “being human” were judged, excluding Christians from civic life and feasts as despised treasonous atheistic haters of humanity.			
<b>Thyatira</b> Revelation 2:18-29	Significant for its trading and numerous trade guilds (including bronze-smiths and cloth-dying), each with its own god – to work, trade, or take part in civil life (in which regular guild feasts were a major cultural marker) one had to be a member. It was a border town and defensive outpost that historically had suffered countless battles, along with troubled local politics, but was becoming prosperous. Although Apollo (“son of Zeus”) was the main focus of worship, there was little emperor worship evident: cultural unity and contributing to trade and the growing prosperity were more significant than religious worship as such.			
<b>Sardis</b> Revelation 3:1-8	A city with a large anti-Christian Jewish population, it was protected by an almost impregnable hill-top acropolis, with near-by sacred hot springs (a fountain of water and life from the god of the underworld), and a fading historical splendour (where wool-dying and wool-whitening were invented?) living now in the shadow of more influential Pergamum. Reputedly the first place to use gold coins, it had been devastated by an earthquake in AD 17 and was thought, through its unfinished rebuild, to be “coming alive” (having been culturally and economically dead) around nature/fertility cults that sought life from death.			
<b>Philadelphia</b> Revelation 3:9-13	Agriculturally rich (grapes), a “door-way” for trade and the military with Phrygia in the east, known as “City of Brotherly Love” (from its name), also significantly damaged by the AD 17 earthquake, leaving many unstable buildings, and a fear of more disasters (partly fulfilled by famine at the time John was writing). Financial support from Rome for rebuilding led to temporary significant emperor worship alongside Greek deities (such as Dionysus, god of wine) but when in AD 92 Rome destroyed half the vineyards (to be replaced with famine-relieving crops?) love for Rome faded in favour of its traditional “Greekness.”			
<b>Laodicea</b> Revelation 3:14-22	Closely linked to Colosse, the only alternate to Philadelphia as a door-way route into Phrygia, supplied by a 9.5 km aqueduct delivering sun-warmed water needing cooling before drinking, famous for its medical school and medicines (“Phrygian Powder,” dissolved into a salve, healed eye disease), black-wool production, and banking. All but destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, it rebuilt with local finance, affirming its wealthy independence by refusing Roman aid. This self-sufficiency, coupled with a large syncretistic Jewish population, meant the relatively secure church suffered little in the way of Jewish or pagan opposition.			
<b>SUMMARY or THEME</b>				